

The Northeast Asian Rim: A Geopolitical Perspective

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Along with the fade out of the cold war the world is undergoing a fundamental restructuring. The process is generally designated as regionalization and globalization. In this context, the paper presents a geopolitical perspective on the future of the Northeast Asia. To meet the global trend, it is expected for the countries in the area to organize an economically cooperative unity, the concept of which the author calls the Northeast Asian Rim(NEAR). With its huge potentials enough to be the largest economic area in the world and rather complicated historical and social backgrounds, the rim is tentatively supposed to have a loose and soft organization, to

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be flexible in dealing with the intra- and interregional relations. The idea underlying the view is that the former area of confrontation between the land power and the sea power is, under the new world environment, going to recover its proper locational attributes and develop to a merging area, a new core. As physical framework of the rim a spatial structure is assumed to consist of two sub-rims and two development axes with four development centers.

Key words: Regionalization, Geopolitics, Cold War, Restructuring, Heartland, Rimland, Merging Area, Spatial Structure

I. Backgrounds

The world map is changing. The traditional political map is being substituted by a new economic map. The familiar bi-polar image of the post-war world is rapidly reshaping into a less acquainted tri-polar or multi-polar world. No one dominant principle, structural or functional, seems to work in this process of global change. After the phenomena it is called globalization and/or regionalization.

Anyway, it seems to be a territorial process. Territorial restructuring reflecting national economic interests is taking place all over the world. Economic activities are interwoven internationally more and more complicated, that is to say, the national boundary in production, distribution and consumption of goods and services is getting less rigid. Free trade and multi-national corporations are blooming at the end of this industrial century. It is confusing, but there must be some order. Scholars are looking for adequate explanations for it. What really is the regionalization? How does it occur and with

which consequences?

First, it may be regarded as a process of recovery: political grouping of nations after ideology into "bad guys" and "good guys" prohibited the 'natural' development of economic activities in geographic terms. Along with the demise of the so called cold war system, the world economy is recovering its geographical rule, spatial interaction after economic principle. Here, the spatial accessibility, functional complementarity and economy of scale etc. operate as important factors in producing regional division of labor and areal economic blocks.

Second, it is a logical consequence of the development of market economy. In other words, when favorable social and physical conditions such as efficient transportation and communication system are given, a national economy will tend to grow by acquiring larger and larger action space even outside of its boundary. Goods are mass-produced and transported into other neighboring market at lower cost. Then, the national economy achieves comparative advantages, economy of scale and so on.

Third, in a modern welfare state, a nation's power is generally defined in economic terms, and the military occupation of other nation's territory is losing its usefulness, so that traditional military interactions between neighboring countries are giving way to economic ones.

If economic interests prevail the international relations today, it means that the economy is more than the economy itself. It also is a means of getting domestic welfare and international stabilizing power that every nation is striving for. Thus, theoretically, a nation's safety would be best guaranteed through its economic wealth, welfare of its people, and cooperative association with other national economies.

EEA and NAFTA is leading the trend. Continental and subcontinental economic blocks are being formed. In Asia, ASEAN is following the trend, APEC, EAEG and many others are proposed or conceptualized. In Northeast Asian realm, among others the Yellow Sea Rim(環黃海圈) and the East Sea Rim(環東海圈) are proposed.¹⁾ Northeast Asian countries are to form a more closely related regional economic organization the conception of which has been hindered by the ideological confrontation of so called cold war system since 1945. The author's idea is to combine the above two rims, naming it as Northeast Asian Rim(NEAR). In spite of rather complicated historical background and cultural heterogeneity, the area is endowed with enormous potential of economic development through mutual cooperation.

II. Geopolitics of North East Asia

1. Geopolitical Way of Thinking

Geopolitics as scientific discipline faded out after the World War Two. Main critics on geopolitics as science was focused on its deterministic character. But it was abused and kicked out of the academic circle decisively for its unclean past: being

1) Many seminars and symposia on the economic cooperation of Northeast Asian countries are held. It seems that the Japanese pay more attention to the East Sea(Sea of Japan) Rim, while the Chinese are primarily interested in the Yellow Sea Rim: cf. Papers presented to the Pohang International Symposium: *The International Order of Development and Cooperation in Korea East Sea Rim*, 1992, Pohang Institute of Science and Technology, Pohang, Korea.

employed in special pleading to promote the interest of particular nations or ideologies. Nazis distorted the theories and concepts of it to justify Germany's growth at the expense of its neighbors as "natural". Post-war German geographers no more wanted to be connected with the "ugly" discipline. They said "Bloß keine Geopolitik mehr!", and gave up an important geographic tradition. Not much different was the situation in Japan after the War. "Great East Asian Sphere of Co-prosperity(大東亞共榮圈)" was, so to speak, nothing but an Asian version of "Lebensraum". It is interesting that Karl Haushofer, the founder of the "Zeitschrift für Geopolitik", served for a period before the War as military attache of German embassy in Tokyo.

Though once stigmatized, geopolitics is not to be discarded as waste. It still offers one of the most useful ways of thinking in locational problems, especially in global or continental scale. No evidence is available, but it can be easily traced that in many strategic decisions of the world powers geopolitical considerations have played not negligible roles.

A. Mahan emphasized the importance of controlling sea lane for a state to protect commerce and wage economic warfare. He therefore advocated a big navy.²⁾ After Mahan there are six fundamental factors that affect the development and maintenance of sea power: geographical position; physical formation of a state; extent of territory; population numbers; national character; and government character. He recognizes a core area in Asia and Russia's domination of it: he assumes a struggle between Russian land power and British sea power.³⁾

2) Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. (Boston: Little Brown, 1890).

3) Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and its Effect upon*

This notion of confrontation between the land power and the sea power took place since then in the center of geopolitical world view.

H. Mackinder's approach to global strategy was similar to that of Mahan, but with a different emphasis and different forecasts.⁴⁾ Mackinder expressed the view that there was a Eurasian Core Area that, protected by inaccessibility from naval power, could shelter a land power that might come to dominate the world from its continental fortress. Mackinder called this Eurasian Core Area the Pivot Area. Later he broadened this strategic concept into Theory of Heartland.⁵⁾

Mahan and Mackinder made a significant contribution to our perspectives of the world, and in a broad sense their assumptions about core area or heartland were substantiated. However there were three major weakness in his work: first, he did not give enough weight to the growing power of North America; second, he failed to explain the seeming contradiction between his thesis of the power of the possessors of the Heartland and the relative weakness of Russia until World War II; and third, he didn't take into account the growing importance of air power and other technological developments. Like Mahan, he oversimplified history and leaned too much on determinism.

N. Spykman saw, however, the real power potential of

International Politics (Boston: Little Brown, 1900).

4) Halford T. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, 1904, pp. 421-437.

5) Halford T. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable, 1919), In this book he composed the famous hypothesis: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland, Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island, Who rules the World Island commands the World."

Eurasia in what Mackinder called "Inner Marginal Crescent". He called this "the Rimland". Spykman, therefore, composed his own dictum.⁶⁾

Spykman advocated the Allies to base their postwar policy on preventing any consolidation of the Rimland. This policy became fundamental in the anti-communist position of the western powers. The so called "containment" strategy seems to be rooted in this perspective basically.

Lin Piao(林彪), late defense minister of China, offered a theory of world revolution that viewed the world as similar to a city and the surrounding countryside(1965).⁷⁾ The rich, industrialized, largely Western countries, represent the city, and the poor, agricultural countries, largely former colonies of Western countries, represent the countryside. The poorer areas will gradually be converted to communism and eventually overwhelm the cities. It is later reflected in "core-periphery" concept, being falsified, however, by the collapse of communist regimes recently.

It is true that all these geostrategic views have flaws, but they have outstanding holistic perspectives which is good at analyzing the interdependent world. As shown above, geopolitical concepts, despite many differences, were characterized by an "acceptance of the proposition that confrontation was endemic in the system." Within this general perspective, notions of hegemony and dominance have tended to prevail and manifest themselves in many ways. It was in

6) "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia, Who rules Eurasia controls the destination of the world": in Nicholas John Spykman, 1942, *America's Strategy in World Politics*; reprinted 1970, Hamden, Shoe String Press.

7) M. I. Glassner, *Political Geography* John (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), p. 234.

geopolitics revived after the seventies, that the more flexible, humanistic approaches began to take place.

2. Northeast Asia: The Merging Area

In Northeast Asia as like in Europe, the two main geostrategic theories (of heartland and of rimland) are practiced. Land power and sea power were keenly confronted in the name of political ideology. Korea, divided into two and undergone a hard civil war, was actually the scapegoat of this experiment of confrontation. Beside historical backgrounds, international conflicts of this area in last century could well be explained by this kind of geostrategic interpretation. Superficially, many conflicts have been, however, coated with ideological colors.

In an era of intercontinental ballistic missile (I.C.B.M.) and space travel, the military aspect of traditional geostrategy is becoming less useful. Moreover, together with the closing of ideological confrontation, the so called cold war is coming to an end.

Consequently, geopolitics of global competition and regional cooperation is getting more and more importance. Economic cooperation at regional basis becomes vital. The formation of economic blocks shows it. It is, however, just the beginning. Cooperation in cultural and ecological field will follow. We cannot exactly predict the future progress, but the regional block economy should develop into the world economy, because it is the way to the free trade in an open world. In this context, it may be a prelude leading to the main event. Nobody knows, nevertheless, how long it will take until the globalization is realized. It is also possible that the main event of globalization won't come at all, and the globalization at national and

regional basis may remain as the final stage. Anyway, the formation of regional blocks is the prevailing trend and will last at least for the coming decades.

The fade out of the cold war system is opening a new era for Northeast Asia. Northeast Asia currently consists of the following nations: China(incl. Taiwan), Russia, Mongolia, Korea(North and South) and Japan which are facing the Pacific to the east and surrounding the East Sea and the Yellow Sea. The land power and the sea power that have been confronting each other are merging together, transforming the former area of military conflict into a new area of economic cooperation. It means that the geopolitics of Northeast Asia is changing fundamentally.

Actually there is no physical change in topographic structure of this area, but the function is shifting very rapidly. In other words, the geopolitical properties of the area is being recovered from the past ideological constraints. We may call it recovery, if they beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning hooks, because iron and steel is better used for tools than weapons. The military map is being reshaped into economic one. The interaction between the nations will be defined by the movement of goods and services, rather than by munitions and hostile words. Now the political obstacles are getting away, and the intraregional interactions are getting flexible and increasing rapidly.

To survive in the global economic competition, to cope with the trend of regionalization, and to be prosperous together in peace, a multilateral cooperative system of countries in this area is necessary and even compulsory.

III. Potentials and Problems

1. Prospects and Potentials

If the international politics shifts from war to peace and from confrontation to cooperation/competition, so will change the geopolitical perspectives from a military strategic one to an economic, cultural and ecological one. Consequently, the military powers will merge into a highly integrated regional economic system. As mentioned above, Northeast Asia has a potential to grow up to the largest and most powerful economic area in the world, the positive factors of which are as follows.

First, the area is located at the center of the largest territorial entity, the Asian continent and the Pacific Ocean, enjoying the largest action space(potential scale) of economy with optimal climatic conditions for human activities.

Second, it possesses tremendous deposits of important raw materials, like coal, iron, oil and natural gas, timber, agricultural products, etc., which were almost sleeping in a closed system behind the curtain.

Third, it has the largest population with high density providing the potential for a huge market and labor supply in the area. The people are apt to learn, tolerant and diligent, which characteristics are essential to high quality labor.

Fourth, the area may appear quite heterogeneous, but on the whole it belongs to one cultural area: the area have the tradition of agrarian society of rice cultivation, Confusianism and the use of Chinese characters in common, sharing similar ways of thinking, if not the level of westernization or modernization.

Fifth, there are strong complementarities among the national

economies of the area. High technology, capital and managerial know how of the developed countries in the area can be transferred to the developing countries. Former socialistic countries can also benefit from the capitalistic experiences of neighboring countries.

2. Problems in the Way

Compared to Europe and North America, there are lots of obstacles in the way to an economic area.

First, There still remains politico-military tension in the area, between North and South Korea as well as between China and Taiwan. These relics of the past would not last so long, but are still active enough to hinder free trade.

Second, there lingers the complicated historical background, especially in the relations to Japan, who once invaded and annexed other neighboring nations. All the previously occupied nations regard that Japan is not yet ready to establish cooperative relations with her neighbors, because she did not apologize sincerely for its past atrocities, neither in words nor in actions.

Third, militarily as well as politico-economically, the tie between the U.S.A. and the nations in the area is so strong that some nations would not regardlessly dare to participate in an exclusive and tight regional organization. For instance Korea and Japan may face the tough question which one they should choose between NAFTA and Northeast Asian one.

Fourth, Russia, China and Japan would not easily give up the effort for military and political hegemony over the area. They are not used to getting along as a non-power state, and would try to exercise dominance over other nations at every

chance, raising conflicts.

Fifth, Every country is looking for markets for their own products, but it seems that there is not any big market presently in the area. To be successful as an economic area, there should be at least one big market, which usually is offered by the most developed and rich country in the area, like the U.S.A. in North America. In Northeast Asia, however, Japan, the only nation who can afford it, is not likely to supplant the U.S.A. function of absorber of Asian goods.

Sixth, The level of economic development and the trade relationship of each country is so different, that a horizontal combination of national economies would hardly function. A vertical integration would, of course, work, but in this case, the development disparity would increase in favor of Japan, resulting in structural dependencies, which the area absolutely doesn't want to see.

Besides, the socio-economic institution as well as physical infrastructure of each country are so diverse and some of them primitive to accommodate and support modern economic activities efficiently.

Consequently, it seems hardly possible for the area to organize such a tightly organized economic block as EC and NAFTA at least in the near future. This is the reason why the author proposes to apply a rather soft and flexible concept(Northeast Asian Rim) instead of an exclusive and rigid one.

IV. Development of Spatial Structure

With the increasing spatial interactions in the area, there

will evolve a new spatial structure. Development centers and subcenters will emerge, which will be linked by development axes across the area. Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing and Shanghai, all of which are growing up to world cities, will function as development centers and compete head to head to acquire the leading position, i.e. to be the hub of Northeast Asia. Harbor cities like Vladivostok, Chongjin, Dalian, Tianjin, Qingdao, Nampo, Pusan, Fukuoka, Shimonoseki, Osaka and many others are expected to get new impulses for growth, and will function as subcenters.

Northeast Asia Economic Area comprises two sub-rims: the East Sea Rim and the Yellow Sea Rim. The coastal zones of both rims will be much benefited by the creation of an economic area and also contribute most actively for further development of the area. These two ring-shaped coastal zones offer the basis for the formation of future development axes of the whole area. By smoothing the figure a little bit after connecting the two rings together and matching it with the former frontiers of the land power and the sea power, we may get the two development axes that will lead the spatial development of the area.⁸⁾

The Main development axis will be the coastal belt stretching from Russian Far East(Komsomolsk-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok) over Tumen River Basin and Manchuria(- Harbin-Changchun -Shenyang) and/or North Korea(-Chongjin-Hamhung-Sinuiju-Dalian) - Tianjin, Qingdao to Shanghai. In the north, the

8) For detailed discussion of the development axes in the area and especially its relevance to the Korean Peninsular where the two axes are assumed to cross, confer to: Yu, Woo-ik, "Concepts of National Living Space in the Northeast Asian Era," in *Economy, Welfare and Land of Korea in the 21st Century*, The Presidential Commission on the 21st Century, 1992, pp. 211-285.

TSR(Trans-Siberian Railroad) and the BAM(Baikal-Amur Mainline) connect the area via Russia with Europe, while in the south it will be linked westward to the main routes of inland China, which may remind us of the old Silk Road.

The secondary development axis is supposed to start in Japan(Tokyo-Osaka-Fukuoka), run northward along the Korean peninsular(Pusan-Seoul-Pyongyang), and split from here into two directions: in the east, after crossing the primary axis in Manchuria(- Jilin-Changchun-Harbin-) and Mongol, it will stretch northward to connect the area with Europe. In the west, after crossing the primary axis at Bohai Bay(Sinuiju - Dalian-Tianjin-Beijing), it will run to Ulanbator and further northward to Russia to connect with Europe.

Assuming that the two development axes will cross in the middle of the rim, we realize anew the geopolitical importance of Manchuria and Korea. The region has been suffering under severe military confrontations throughout the 20th century, and is now expected to merge the conflicts and play the central function in the coming century, both of which, the author means, by virtue of its importance in geopolitical location. Along with these development axes transportation and communication network will be extended, and accompanied with urbanization, industrialization will proceed, the effects of which are expected to spread to the rest of the area.

As shown in attached map, the East Sea and the Yellow Sea are going to be Mediteranean seas of Northeast Asia. Keeping these two seas in peace and order will be a vital task for the stability of the area, not to mention their ecological significance for the area and the world.

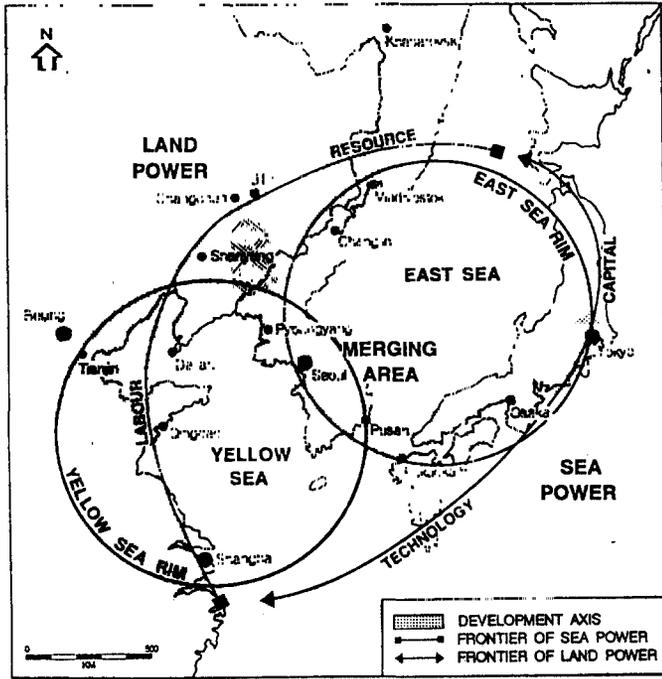


Fig. 1. A Geopolitical Interpretation of the Northeast Asian Rim

V. Concluding Remarks

If Mackinder called the North Atlantic “the Midland Ocean,” and designated the area from Volga to Rockies as “the main geographical habitat of Western civilization”,⁹⁾ the Pacific in the 21st century will be the “the World Ocean” and the land around which “the main habitat of the global civilization”.

9) Halford, J. Mackinder, *The Nations of the Modern World*, Vol. 2 (London: George Philip & Son, 1924), p. 251.

Now, the end of cold war is opening up opportunities for a host of reorientations. The concept of Northeast Asian Rim is one of them. It asks a revolutionary shift in thinking. The area of most serious confrontation will emerge as a new core integrating the largest economic area of the world. In the beginning of the next century, the area would be the most powerful territorial unit in the global economy. There are still lots of socio-economic as well as physical obstacles in the way, not to mention the possible struggle for political hegemony and the ecological concerns. Anyhow, the motor began to roll and makes its own way. In conclusion, the following statements could be made regarding to the future of the Northeast Asian Rim.

First, the development will be slow at the beginning, and be accelerated with lapse of time. It will arrive at its full speed after the reunification of Korea, probably in the very beginning of the next century.

Second, introducing a kind of open regionalism and soft organization would help the area to deal flexibly with intraregional frictions as well as interregional conflicts. Similarly, it is not supposed for the area to hasten and jump over the initial stages of cooperation. It would better begin with an enlargement of trade volume followed by direct investment and free trade, and develop to be integrated as an economic community before reaching final stage of global free trade.

Third, The questions are still open, if the organization will develop and arrive at the final stage at all, and if it will extend to an intercontinental organization like Pan-Pacific Rim eventually. Considering that the world is undergoing a regional polarization process of economic power, and assuming a tripolar system of North America, Europe and Northeast Asia, a

regional economic block, even if loosely organized, seems to be unavoidable for the area.

Fourth, Japan is in a situation to play the leading role in realizing the concept. At the same time, however, her responsibility as developed nation with capital and advanced technology should be more emphasized than it shows presently. It may sound unfair, but it is: to be co-prosperous, as she said half century ago, the rich has more to contribute to the community.

Last, but not the least, attention should be paid to the environmental preservation. One cannot overemphasize the importance of the environment, especially when, an industrialization is going on with an unprecedented speed and scale.